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SONGS THAT DRY THE MOUTH

by

Dana Lorraine McCrossin

B.A., University of Michigan, 1984

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

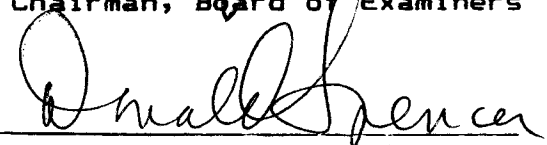
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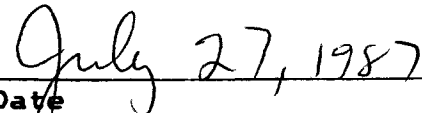
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"SONG FOR BETH", CACHE REVIEW

forthcoming

"AND YOU HAVE COME TO KNOW LOVE", STONE COUNTRY

"FARTHER WEST", EARTH FIRST

"MIRAGE", EARTH FIRST

"WINTER FIELD", HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

"WINTER POEM", EARTH FIRST

for my Mother, Father, and Stephen Dunning,
who supported me and spurred me on

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SECTION I

MIDWEST TREMORS

All around us the world loosens
like strewn hay. A late thaw
reveals the earth, the sunset striates
pink and orange, topping
the fields of trees, split
and laid out for the taking.

From the west porch we first heard chimes,
delicate shivers
the maples gave off. With the wind

we ran after death, tracking a calf.
Plodding hard, we crawled between the stalks
of unripe corn switching at us,
raising blotches, the color of lady bugs
on our arms and legs.

During that quake we came to know fear
from the harsh yapping farm dogs
combing for a sniff of meat,
from the dried splits of earth
crumbling hoof prints into uncontained anthills
where uncertainty had been seeded.

IN THE HAY SEASON

The rain isn't supposed to fall
muddied, bruising the back roads
into menacing descriptions
of what we call home.
Even if we've witnessed fireflies
grazing like falling stars
across the summer nights,
even if we hover
under the desperate moon,
cling to its path
from calving, to the first tongue
riding side-saddle from the dead
smile, all of us
endures the fallowing
that comes after,
after we pitch bales
toward the moon, after we ice
our bluing arms, call each other
"delicate," forgetting the strength taken
in tossing the last dried stalks
away from the night's storm.
In this hay season cut fields
emblazon miry rows,
menacing as those bound stacks
breathless and dry,
where nothing escapes
not even if it sparks life.

WE COULD START THIS GAME AGAIN

After six weeks of dredging
your face up; in bean rows,
at second base, against the twilight
in the grass,
I sought out the dark
that would cling to skin
the way humidity traps
a body in its sweat;
the way cold rain forces children
into their cardboard caves,
their mothers into the glare
of afternoon opera.

In this spring I refind my scent
foraged from the mountains,
pine cones and needles,
their sticky skins a salve.
I sink my lines into the waters
of the Blackfoot, Rock Creek, my hunger
raising the open-mouthed rainbows.
In their vital currents
nothing holds still, nothing leads back
to your stilled grey eyes.

On this visit I hear tales.
You are searching
for absolution, for the sound of grass
parting itself, for the sway and creak
of baseball bleachers heavy,
once again, with lilac and forgetting,
and the first throw of the game.

FARM POND SWIM

In the muck and spawn
no one questions
the dangers in a body breathing
the south winds carried over
from Rex's pig farm.
No one gives a shit,
each of us stomachs it,
falls back to dream golden
mud baths, European hot
springs. No one questions
how to shield against the heat,
until we walk out,
skin darkened to slug silk sheen.

VISITATION

It begins with a bell sounding
for the second time, and the clatter
of pork and beef platters passed
around with bowls of potatoes and greens.
It settles into the after dinner squeals
of brothers wrestling on the lawn,
but where it comes to is:
father asleep beneath the sports section,
mother, dishes loaded, delighted
in her fly-flicking,
brother chipping golf balls
in the sideyard under the full moon
thinking of fast cars shooting down
the road outside your house
and you, in front of a typed-out story
about an urban hospital, or men in shipyards,
a cigarette perched between your fingers
and me hiding in the front lawn shadows
looking in the sky for something familiar.

LUNULAE

They lop off half the moon and constellations
With a scalpel slice

And I imagine my own black hole
In front of the medicine cabinet,

Grab my pear-flesh
Manipulate it flat

Force its roundness to recede
Back into my ribs.

I close my eyes to bare bone and red
Longitudes on my chest;

Half an ocean, half a smile.

Your new breast rides your chest
Like a loose saddle, unsure cowboy

Chafing you purple
You tell me it's like blossoming delphinium.

I trace the petals with my fingers.

WHAT I TAKE WITH ME

I have flattened its shine
to Tahitian
rose and plum, for years
it was too bright,
dulling the pink curtains
of my windows. I hid its red
beneath dirty clothes
and books, wishing
it into a muted corner
of chestnut panel.
I lugged that chair
from house to house
setting it in the corner,
flopping a hat
on its limbs.

Sanding those limbs
you infused the paint
into its frame.
Its wicker seat shellacked,
became a fired engine,
your wish, for me to race
to the spun moon,
to the height of thinkers
and desk-tops.
And just as you filled your rooms
with fuschia prints
weaving banners to hand down,
just as banners color
the days between mother and daughter
we once sat,
me tucked into your lap,
you calling me "butterfly,"
tucked into this chair.

TWO MINUTE BLANCHING

The beans are blanching,
Jennifer did the green ones yesterday,
took the afternoon to bottle a jug's worth.
Today everything is packed in
the sunset coming down on Blue Mountain,
even hiking to Harper's Bridge
backs into my run at Skyview Park.
The days are shortening into bursts
of whatever I can catch,
cold breath of night under the flood lights,
the whack of golfballs clearing the knapweed
slopes and water below the sixth green,
sunk as quick as the clearing of it.
In two minutes those beans will be different
no enzymes to decay them.
And in two minutes I will have
a bit of summer cut and frozen away.

MEMO TO DANA AND BILL

(found poem)

Friday, February 12, 1982:

I got your birthday gift. It's something
I really needed (Electric Shoe Shiner.)
I'm sorry it arrived broken, but I'm sure
it can be fixed properly.
I can really use it. Thanks for your
ingenuity.
Love, Dad

STONE UNVEILING

We walk among your friends
trying to distinguish one granite name
from the others. Your's should be diamond shaped,
yet there are no sharp edges to trip
on. Everything seems polished
in the sun. The penciled engravings
cast no shadows. Under the trees
we meditate this second
passing. We can not ignore
your silenced tongue, the flapping
funeral tents and last winter's bite.
To look into the faces of my cousins
is to find your corncob grin,
your chin and nose form the bridge
in Aunt Cheryl's face,
her hands freckled from your gift of golf.
We listen for your seven iron
slice through the air, through
the air of absence. Among these silent
stones we bloom
against the summer's heat, stones
that encompass winter's certain bite.

AFTER THE FIRST LEAVING THERE IS NO OTHER

"after the first death there is no
other"

-Dylan Thomas-

i nothing is forever

Our bed is ground stone, marked
in name only, hardening in January's
wind - I shut it out, drop the blinds

over July's bargains,
our nicks and grooves sanded out.
Artifacts of our cooking,

soured soup and turkey bones.
I kick your Bean shirt down the hall,
and face your three day beard,

raw circles under your eyes.
Embracing this moment, we
smell our last train ride west,

the wobbly shake our bodies made
in the top-bunk, strapped in for safety.
And then I turn away - you help me.

ii Bed of roses

The Rabbi sits Shiva with us,
tells us about her first olive tree,
a soda-girl married under its boughs.

My father gives me pictures of her new Jerusalem,
a sandlot outside of Muskegon -
taken two days before she swam the "Mile."

In those days she was called "coach."
Today we've dressed her in grey.
My brother, father, and I huddle in black,

stiffening like iced branches.
She'll miss my birthday.
In the roses I look for her face,

but the petals wilt wet.

iii the nameless

Now it's just pack-it-up,
find a floor to bed down on.
Don't need groceries, friends nurse me

with soirees, breastmilk for the road.
My last therapy session I show up late,
forget to shower, crack a joke about the book August

It is August.
My new lover baits me,
"Stay," with Yushan shrimp

and a new shower curtain,
but gardening and household appliances make me
nervous
just want to know the duende of Lorca,

and the smell of Nag Champa.
Leaving is death, you know,
only friends try to feed you,

before the burn of the interstate stretch.

CAMPING TRIP

"but human beings are sexy"

-Maria Tolpin-

All year we planned that trip
went to Bowline-Knot conventions,
slept at Pickerel Lake,
cooked beans in a pot
pretending the wood was larch.
We drove nights looking for the Perseus showers
taking turns navigating.
All for three days in a Canadian province,
sunset on Lake Huron, and a can of black olives.

"Last night we were dunes
swaddled by the grasses, goose down
and stars." We read the signs,
MARRAN GRASS KEEPS THE EARTH FROM MOVING AWAY
underfoot we are damp from our last walk
on the beach with the rain.

I trim my room in your colors
thinking rosewood will bring your arms
and legs like ribbons around me.
Maria, you said, "human beings are sexy, wonderful
creatures,"/
and then plunged away into the saltless waves.
That beach seems far from these mountains
and the earth keeps moving away.

WINTER POEM

We hug together. "Zip up your sleeping bag."
In this Vermont blizzard, full with howlings,
the trees, loose again,
brew over our sacked-in-bank,
a green pebble --
in winter's open palm. We see the breath of this
in the frames of your glasses.
"If you hold me tight, we can stay here forever."

HOW FAR TO GO

i

on the line

On a map it sets the thumb
and index finger.
This is a place we want to hold
in the hand, cup to the chest.
Everyone knows the names
for mountains, the colors
in snow, and they know which trails
lead to the moon.

ii

closer up

From the Bitterroot the notches,
sun-burnt gorges and isolation
cut out, seem hard to nuzzle.
Suppose those crevices
were thumbprints, mine -
would they soften
under the moon's blinding light?

iii

sleet

In Salt Lake we argue;
guilt comes in waves of carlights
and gas stations.
The slow moving "I love you"
becomes part of an aubade
you expect me to participate in.

FISHING THE RIVER

We hike the trail
to the bank,
poles lashed to our backs.
One side of the fork roars
up with rocks,
the other moves silent
under layers of feeding
fish. To cast my line
is to call out hungry,
to anchor myself
to this rock
seeded with moss
and sunless sky.

MIRAGE

Crossing Nevada, windows rolled up
to the collar,
you can see our trails,
beer cans and glass seeding
the tumble weed.

Even as I drive the radio vibrates a blasting
underground. The tremulous leaching of earth
keeps reaching out
toward the fissures of this road.

FARTHER WEST

You will drive by a farm house.
Lean against the winter wheat.
It has stood there waiting for you,
to see, as I have described to you
many times, as if I had lived there
all my life watching the water pool
in the Columbia and the Northern Lights.
Remember my telling you
how they could bend the clouds toward the ground.

SECTION II

SCULPTING ANGELS

inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke
and the sculpture of Curt Brüll

i

haunted by voices

Somewhere in the back of all our dreams
is a dog barking.

He's the one pulling us back
from sinking in tubs of oil --
the one rattling garbage cans,
howling at the cracked open moon.
Perhaps you too are listening
to that wild barking at the sky
as the moon splits itself
open in the back of your dreams
leaving you no place to retreat.

ii

casting out stones

I wanted to trace smug faces
on your stomach, outlining
each hair, and following the bow
of your inner thigh --
the shaping jiggling your belly.
But you have taught me
that I can not turn to you as an angel.
You will not take in my rising breath
as yours. You have taught me that angels
cast awkward light and shadows
on even the innocent.

iii
art exhibit

These golden statues age quietly here.

They are old men nodding with the pay of a hand.
With nowhere to go they ruffle
onto their chairs, or benches, suspended.
Here, there are no birds to feed,
still their arched arms
flutter up and down like silk pigeons.

iv
for one who fears

And who will you turn away from
now? Neither child nor night
and the stones already rock
in your untransmutable world
of echoes and ice.

v

studio pieces

Even though you've propped them
up with cushions of chicken wire and plaster
their waists protrude
just above slack line,
where you'll drift a sheet,
or tatter a shirt for a belt.
In the corner there is a younger one,
a broad stanced woman
her body unconformed to cloth or metal.
She stands easy
her feet swollen out like planters.

vi

dance sculpture

You paint her red
the day she leaves for New York.
Not wanting to lose
your tendered thumb prints
you toss a bucket of appaloosa red
on her hat. You'd always hated it, tipped
over her eye, when she sat
naked, chilled to the plaster.
You thought her precocious
when you first wanted to capture her,
when she said, "art was just a mind fuck."
You paint her red.

vii

red and brown and rotting

Once, these amphoras were flowerbeds of Norse
Fire, Bleeding Heart growing
fluid, muscular shapings
of air, their necks, opened up
mouths skimming the night for stars.
Now they belly out, line up
like trophies
red and brown and rotting.

viii

plucking the wings of angels

This little one has been standing
making illusory vows
to God, the wind and herself,
lonely for your touch
of inspiration.
So you ask me
to bend my knee
shift my hip, turn
away from the wind,
droop my shirt off my shoulder.
"A little lower please."
Grasping to finish
you rearrange my breasts,
ignore their perkiness
unaffected by gravity
unlike the ones pinched
between your thumb and finger.
I recede into your landscape
of transmutable curves of skin
that your palms stretch
against each other.
You do not name us
as we all flower
into zoftig thighs, peared flesh,
bellies ripening toward the ceiling.

MUSEUM VISIT

inspired by Joan Miro

On vacation, families occupy
themselves with rides
into the desert, searching
for black eyes glaring
back from the shoulder
as the twilight approaches casually,
muting the cars into sunset.

How do these families and eyes
see these creatures poked
between cactus and bloom,
distinguish the ear
of the rabbit from the saguaro.
Just as a family might revolve
through most landscapes, scan
subtle changes –
they come upon themselves:

At a painting,
a stairway leads to a door
slightly cracked
open to reveal
the cut corner,
a window opening
into night.
They notice the slope
in the steps, the yellow age
speckling the wood,
shadows under the door.
They wonder who stands behind.
They look for the first star
in the western sky.

But distinctions between bud
and skin seem haphazard,
bare muted exchanges,
leading grain by grain
to where we all must jump
from the artifice.

POOL POEMS

i

The lifeguard practices holding smoke
under water, experiments
with pulmonary development. Master
of the salt of the earth he perches
over the temperate water
then evaporates with the climate.

ii

The blue lycra girl presses
her feet into fins, flicks
water toward her mother propped
on the steps, reading Cousteau.
The woman hears her own gurgles,
shallow fish kisses, remembers
seeing him, his marine goggles
shading the glare into aquamarine lies.

iii

The brown-haired woman ties
her straps under her arms,
asks a man to rub oil
on her back, says, "I like swimming
stripped down to the shadow,
where the water invades
the soft parts," looking for his
dropped-open-mouth-promises.

iv

The Spanish girl leaves behind clinging
t-shirts hiding fourteen's innocence.
She chirps her r's
into squeals, plunging
the chilling water, then rises,
head cocked as if wearing an Esther Williams
headpiece.

v

He thinks it's the Iwojima beach,
where Lancaster threw his body
against Kerr's. He leaves his shorts
and the empty bottle of Daniels
on the steps, swims into the glare,
the Hollywood sun.
Disorientation takes him
into the lily pads and snakes,
the slime that pulls him under
his own screams.

YOUR CALLS CAN'T BE TRACED

It doesn't matter who
answers, you'll ask
your questions anyway,
like a poet, enamored
with the harsh sounds, crotch,
clit, pant, pant, panties.
Always waiting for the final
caesura, that gasped breath
that relieves you in its click off.

THE MAN LIVING ABOVE ME PACES NIGHTS

The man in three d
has been pacing in and out
of cells since he was 15,
feeling closer to matrons and guards
and the swingy beat of their keys.
In between draws
off a joint he says, "man
this is the only thing ever
that been there for me."
He tells us about the nights, inside,
rattled awake by cups and spoons,
and men crying for women waiting
with apple cake and silk slips
to be passed between the bars,
then tucked behind a brick. He tells
of those curling into the corners,
withdrawing from the voices.
He tells how a world shaped
down to a yellowed porcelain bowl
will frame all the picture postcard
escapes- how occupations can develop
when left with 20 years of man-handled
food and bad detective novels.
He recalls his first month
sleepless on a bare floor,
his first steps, outlining
the bathroom tiles.

THE HARVEST AND NOURISHMENT OF FRUIT

This evening this basket of red
and purple pomes will become gifts
of healing. My loneliness
climbs the plum tree
to forget its age.
It swings up, grabs the limbs
to steady itself. I find myself
leaning out a bit, stretching
for the ripest ones
looking like tight young men
waiting to be picked.

AT THE FAIR

The rodeo boys slap backs
and sweat against the spine,
knees dug in as they pop
and scratch their best horse.

A ferris wheel spins its moonlight
over the mountain and grounds
and we are rusting stars
looking over pigs and sheep,
blue ribboned, stalls
lined with wood chips
and straw, where three boys
whooping up after seeing
their first bronc bust
his rider into splinters
tag up for the next ride
on the tilt-o-wheel.

In the bleachers, pig-tail twins
cross Mother of Mary's
for the rodeo clowns who'll steal
a kiss, or take 'em for a piggy-
back and soda, giggles tethered
above their blonde heathered
heads, dreaming as they've dreamed
all year long.

BLACK BRANCHES AND MUSIC

for Greg Pape

Lunch, something a lover
of mine calls sophisticated,
a maneuver one makes before one
decides how much one really wants
to chew, sink their teeth into.
This is more than lunch,
this is black branches
and music spilling off our plates,
and looking into your eyes, asphodel
eyes, and seeing a lover of mine,
sophisticated, one who has walked
out of the desert again and again
each time bringing with him a song,
a cante hondo squeezed
from the saquaro, the mesquite,
the wind, like water, to quench
the dried riverbeds and mountains.
This is more than gazpacho and tea.
This is one succulent speaking
to another, seeding the wind.

WINTER FIELD

Branch, lean
as a bone
winter conspires you
into the sparest
mapping of shadow.

FOOLING

The only one foolin here
is me. I ain't so grown up
that nothin will ever hurt
again. Even the best intended
lies can't protect me
from you. You, callin my name
in the dark, name you weavin,
combin our bodies into, this braid
of sweat and foolish hearts.
Nope, foolin ain't somethin I be
good at. Me as serious as any fool.

IF NOT AN APPLE WHY DENY IT

William Carlos Williams
parody

This is just to say
thank you for the glass
of Greek wine, the apple soaked
but still hard from its peeling.
But I don't want to be your apple
peeled in some new way,
let me be seductive
in all my glory,
let my skin demand you to bite
just as you might any other
rather than bronze me, fashion me
into something I am not.
Let us drink to the delight of glazed eyes
and Greek women crying out at the first snow.
This is just to say
that I am delicious as you've suspected
and you are already a fallen man.

SECTION III

SONGS THAT DRY THE MOUTH

We've all heard them slice
the rocks under a red desert
sun. We've heard tales
of them, those red
sky mornings that hasten
a sailor's whistle till it dries
on his lips. These are the songs
a dog pricks up his ears for, tilts
his head with misunderstanding.
Sometimes we hear one,
wonder if anyone "heard
it too." Sometimes we see
them on the highway, waves
like heat distortion
we call sun, sometimes.
These are the songs
that raise welts
in the folds of a soft belly, dry
the clap of a strangers glove
to blood on the mouth. Hymns,
vaporous as wind, leaching
toward rural valley wells
as depression, balled fists
and black eyes. These are the songs
we risk to the laceration of the tongue,
while we utter invincibility.
These are the vaporous ones
that suckle us through
the early autumn nights.

THE FISH ARE CRYING HUNGRY

for Paul Zarzyski

The fish have started feeding.
In amazement of this event
it has taken me ten minutes to fire
the logs. This camp could be a movie:
a boy in his canoe, red shirt
scratching through his jacket elbows.
From here I would yell to that boy
tell him that the fish are feeding,
how easy it would be to drop
his line for the bites. I would slip off
this quiet stance I am harboring
under the ponderosas watching
water circles formed by hungry mouths.
but the boy and I keep drifting,
as if ignoring the thriving breaks
on the surface, against the shore.
Latched only to the smoke
and wind that has screened us
in our own circle of bound cold --
we lift our hands, blow on them,
to make our own hungry circles.

SONG FOR BETH

Tonight the kettle cries
its heaved breath against the window.
Smudged and warm, its tap-rattle kicks
at the rib of night,
and the different breaths;
tarragon, apple and myrrh
meld sweet with memory --
we listen to it weep and hear other cries.

Tonight we feel the pull of a stitch --
a mother's Irish moss row,
woven and unraveled.
Uruguay wool swims on the floor,
as we remake ourselves like
byzantine christmas cards
drawn with red-gold threads
and the shadow of the Birch moon.

A tapestry of exoduses and family portraits
laid out in piecework quilts,
embroidered with pearls/hand-dipped peas.
Together we string and paste
our lives into one open-mouthed note,
and we make steam:
Nicaraguan coffee, hot soaks in the tub
and cider brews, gleaned from
cold gasps in bed and blowing candles out,
all the ways we let go to the night air.

WHALE SONG

I couch myself, pulling limp
fins into my chest
and from within my breathlessness,
that pouch of fetal voices,
guttural songs burst out. For two
hours these cries signal a lone
resignation to this beach of absence.
And people will find me, wonder why
I chose to cradle
my whittled body, wonder why whale bones
resembling the landscape breaches
in coves are just as likely places
to be filled with absence,
and people wondering, wondering why
the grey shadows of whales circle
passively for years, then in a cove
where strips of sand cast into teal
from the thinning air,
beach: to counter that constant trick of finality,
in the push that separates the tenacious whale
bones, the absence the harp
sings between urgency and rhythm.

UNCOUPLINGS

for David

What did we know about links
of steel, metal couplings
that came in S twists, pretzeled
figures. What did we know
about the color of weather,
the fall's tungsten sky
that would evaporate.
And what do we know of anything
lasting, from your father's Lionel
sets that circle aimlessly
to a teacher's revision of language.
Lessons do not sustain the laughter of wind,
the regular grinding out of sparks.
Each season, thousands uncouple,
betrayed, loose trains
ready to run the rails.

SPRING SONG

It sweats on the window,
sweats black wind, black
pearled wind and spring, and screaming.
There is screaming. It pinkens
the ground sprung loose
with all of spring
bobbing, flowers and cat-tails.
This is the only song I feel
like singing; the notes, cinders
and paper flying up into the air,
the tail of the black breeze
fishing for hollowed mouth songs,
the cut songs, the cut,
spewing from the lips,
from my legs stretching
open to that night
I saw your face in the shadow
of the fire, blackened, red
burning.

WELL OF ROTTING MANGOES

for Gabriella Theresa

The sap-sided bricks
draw the brittle bodies

below water level.
Citrus and mango peels

mute the harbored smells
into sugar seasoned with sweat.

In Nicaragua death wells.
Dry water holes pool

with grinning faces,
settled in the riveting silence.

And this sunken cave,
this opened-basket that gathers

voices of boys, songs
in the ditch dirt,

shades ruddy, moistens,
broods the brittle clues.

AND TAKE THIS TOO

"... for the lips of a loose woman
drip honey, and her speech is
smoother than oil; but in the end
she is bitter as wormwood, sharp
as a two-edged sword. Her feet go
down to death."

-Proverbs-

And God gives to man this song
to be turned over to his sons,
the teachings of woman
as a plumed feather winding
at the ankles, cutting
the sinew of the leg
to a kneel. But God forgets
that a good man cares
for himself,
from the loneliest drives
will shove a hand into a pocket
of desire, without prompting.
That in the absence of woman
man seduces himself to believe
the moon is the one that draws
his body into its lunacy of prickly heat,
the recognition of his own steely bones
and curves. In the end
there is no other place to look
for ones strength, as the soul lies
open as dust, pummels all paths
turning back on themselves.

THE AFRICAN LEAVES ARE NO LONGER

Which window let those flickering
limes, fruit to my eyes, in.
I lived for hours watching
through the odd, twelve
by sixteen inch window,
part dream, part
what I had.
Past them I saw the peaks
capped in snow, and summer
awkwardly passing. The leaves are African
no longer, they are the tanned
bitter edges of Montana's sun.
They are the disconnected
feathers that fall down exhausted,
sometimes the tail
of the magpie come to nest
in our willows, their cries
spring through the branches
switching out a reminder:
one cold morning, you curled away,
the curtains blowing back, revealing
the green rippling and child, fitful,
under my ribs. I was thinking
you were asleep, when you were already
crouching,
by a stump, a grove
of ash trees
your arms cradling a gun,
your knees in wait,
for the crackles
a hoof will snap as it steps
into death.
You were a kid raking
leaves into war piles,
exploding as you clapped
handfuls into the air.

FOR A RETURN

In Mexico she reads the Nicaraguan headlines,
it is humid there too.
So she dresses herself in a baggy t-shirt
pictured with a fishing boat
and an empty beach.
Twists her hair up on the sides,
puts on green earrings from Peru
with the stones sent from his first dig.

In that place the sun could not get hot enough
when waiting for the farmers
returning from the hills with beans,
or him from within the mountain sides.

She can not sing a tune to take her back
to the light of the fire,
their safety lying in their voices
and American pop songs to the night air.
She can not shinny a tree
or hook herself to the sky like a hawk.
There is no place high enough to look
for his return.

She makes herself cup after cup of espresso,
smokes Mexican cigarettes
rolled between his fingers
two nights ago, before she planed out,
air cut off the way a kiss cuts off farewells.

In the North it is not possible
to bring his skin or voice alive again,
his breath swallowed in her kiss,
in the telegram, crumpled,
lies of his return,
that it has cooled in the south.

CALLING ME BACK

You say that I leave you,
dart off as if searching for a forest
sprouting wild in the back of a wheatfield,
or a lake, flat as stone,
one you say will offer me rest.
Sometimes at night when we drive
you see me leap into the cool
baked bricks of a tunnel, calling
the spray-paint names my own.
In this shade, you tell me walls are penetrable.
And you call to me, as a star
might cut clear night from the trees,
as a starfish, orange and curling, might root
for its last suck of sea,
to bring me back
as brine seasons a shore for a surrender
to a tender reshaping.

KNITTING MYSELF INTO A MAGENTA LOVE SONG

I want to knit an apple sweater,
not a green Australian import,
a magenta apple, an Arkansas Black,
a sweater that walks into a room
alone, one that I can hitch the sleeves
past my wrists to reveal delicious elbows,
magenta elbows.

I want to knit a lippy-red grin,
knit the glow of love back on
because I wear it well,
because I slip into it well,
fall into its red sappling center.

I want to knit a sweater that will seed
and shield, a talisman to wear like my name,
a lithuanian love song, relentlessly sung.

AND YOU HAVE COME TO KNOW LOVE

for my brother

And the wind has called to you
a name that bends the papyrus
and you have listened to the stalks
pitch themselves back and forth
and this has soothed you.

And you have come upon the imprint
of another, distinguished
the slope of her toes
from your flattened arch
and you are calmed by these tracings.

And you will not break this sudden stillness
neither by voice nor by stone.

SONG DARING US TO DANCE

The night air tells us
how to breathe,
tells us when to move
off the ledge. On Superstition
Mountain our slapping leap away draws us
back against the force, you and I
become solidity wedged against movement.
Tail feathers and bone fingers extend
for balance, whistle through pockets,
reach to clear the roughening
currents. Hanging taut we are a shiver
of breathing, singing like the stars
with our few dimmed answers,
where all things that bare
light are suspended
ripcords - waiting the pull
of the night air.

AND WE KNOW THE RIVER LIES WAITING

We unravel our love as a rope
across the Dakotas, thinking it
will leave a trail, easily retraced.
But we find that snow twists
even the simplest lines
into knots, chills the quietest fall leaves
fluttering from our mouths.
That water no matter how sustaining
doesn't always revive, will wear away
the canyon we shaped ourselves into
till we become only a shallow thumbprint
on the skin.
There is no way to reel in
promises, the slack snaps
in the waiting for spring.
So we allow ourselves to be baited
by the swell of the creek,
a hatching fly
coiled and wanting
to draw into our winter bodies.
And we hear ourselves say, "yes, yes,
I want to swim in the vital movement."

ONE PROPOSAL LIKE THIS

for Scott M. Lewis

I learn to pivot,
a painful turn on the heel.
The trick is to not look
back, and to walk as tall as possible;
magic lies in the credibility
of the act. If this is a chess game
what move would you call it?
Castling, a gambit, does it matter?
Ease is how you make it,
so let me ease you into this:
I cannot be like any other person
you've met, it's simply impossible;
that implies that anything is possible,
even if this is not the best
of all possible worlds. We could be on
a butte, wildflowers at our feet,
or sand from the gates
of Knossos. Everyone should have one
proposal like this, careless in its demeanor,
as vital as inspiration:
Come to Greece.
Everyone should be someone's
first, everyone should have a second
chance to look at the Acropolis
for the first time.

STONES THAT COULD BLOOM

We were the first to find a solace
soundless in the stones,

where we could finally listen
to our screams snapping

with the fire, shifting with winter.
We heard old blastings

until the Birds of Paradise shed
their purple and orange petals

on the desert floor,
breaking the paths of wild horses

running the mesas against fear and pain.

The workers, the ones that survived
the cave-ins called it Casa La Mina

for the stones they carried on their backs
for the obreros who drove themselves

into the mountains, away from the ranch-dry
women, the honeyed sopapillas they floured

on the hot stones and seeded the fields
with for rain. They named it

for the obreros flooding
to the mouth, no longer canaries

in song like strung light
beamed from the throat: AVISO.

At Casa La Mina we opened ourselves to the night
held each other under its blue shadow,

wove these words: ya no habra traideroes
as our own boldness.

We took the bold scraps
as directions, asking us to mine

for the rooted recuerdos in the walls.
We palmed them like tablets

tracked back to the stroking
hands, listened for them

saying, "here take this,"
as the stars passed over us

like rain, even and burning the ease
from our skin.

If it wasn't for the mountains
the sky could grind us

into its glare covering this valley
where stones lay heavy,

stones that could bloom
in a desert storm

far from this thickness in the air
that has made us forget the colors

of snow, that we're in this together,
that we know how to break the sky

open and wet, and this house
could become amaryllis blooming

in the winter heat.